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*Ethical Pluralism*  
*and the*  
*Universal Error*  
*in*  
*Moral Enquiry*

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### ***1/ Moral relativism versus moral universalism***

The intention of this paper is to reveal what may well be a central error in moral enquiry; a widespread and subtle transposition of an assumption belonging to the realm of theoretical reason which influences, yet ultimately frustrates, moral reasoning. This assumption is the belief that a well-constructed moral problem can only have one possible solution in the same way that any theoretical question can only have one solution. If more than one solution is available, and it is impossible to decide between the merits of the answers, it is commonly supposed that the question is either badly framed or that it arises as the result of a conceptual error.

Not all practical judgements are universal: “what career ought one to pursue” cannot, for example, be answered definitively for all people, at all times and in all places. However, the universality of moral judgements is seemingly necessary to resolve conflicts of value: if I say human sacrifice is wrong and you say human sacrifice is right, either one of us is, or both of us are, mistaken in our answer or the question is conceptually confused. Conceptual bewilderment may have arisen from derivations from the more fundamental principle “killing is wrong.” Even that, in some societies, has exceptions: self-defence, war and, perhaps, euthanasia. In the first two exceptions, the moral stance of the agent is trumped by necessity, whereas in the final example a higher moral principle (“the good life”) comes into play. It is easy to see how human sacrifice may be necessary in some belief systems (“we must sacrifice, otherwise it won’t rain”), or even determined by a higher moral principle (“the victim will be rewarded in heaven”; “it is the will of the gods”). Once we have the proper conceptual description before us, then we can ask whether it was a cogent principle or not and whether one or both of us were mistaken in our response to the original question.

Yet, the search for universal principles in moral enquiry is beset by two problems: either they are just not available; or if they are available, they are vacuous and non-substantial. Take, for example, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhist idols in Afghanistan. The Taliban justified the destruction in terms of their faith: if one holds that all false idols are blasphemous, then these idols must be destroyed. Why should we not destroy these statues? The protestors did not have a universal principle with which to trump the relative principle of the Taliban. The answers ranged from: “because they are beautiful” to some substantial principle of restoration (the past should be preserved for educational purposes). In other words, the supposedly secular principles were themselves relative to a belief system which itself requires justification. The only point of agreement seemed to be the moral principle of respect, but again depending on which tradition or way of life one inhabits, this principle is open to a variety of interpretations and cannot resolve the conflict without substantial interpretation. And that interpretation, one would assume, largely depends on the meanings and values of the particular agent’s specific way of life.

Of course, the rejection of the claim that a moral question has but one solution overtly commits one to pluralism concerning moral values and motivations, or as it is more commonly known, ‘relativism’. It is perhaps wise to say a few words about this thesis. Relativism, as a meta-ethical theory, recognises the intricate connections that exist between the possibility of making moral judgements and the moral agent’s way of life. It is most simply understood as the thesis that the agent’s moral beliefs, motivations and values are derived from and are dependent on the society he or she inhabits. It is not to be understood as

the absurd claim that one has no right to pass judgement on the moral beliefs of others since this itself proposes the value of non-interference as a universal value and, therefore, as a theory of relativism it is self-refuting.<sup>1</sup> One need only hold that moral values are derived from a way of life, which is to say, the ascription of the concepts of good and bad and right and wrong depends on the way of life of the moral agent. This says nothing about the revisability or rejection of these beliefs and it should not be assumed that the beliefs of one's birth remain unchanged.

The most attractive aspect of relativism is quite simply that it explains the variety of moral beliefs and values throughout the world and amongst different societies: there are many different and conflicting moral beliefs because they are derived from different societies and are not universally rational or objectively true. Moreover, value systems may exhibit certain features of a limited rationality, that is moral judgements may have logical connections, but only within a context defined by one's way of life. Herein, though, lies the weakness of relativism.

Even at its most robust, a theory of moral relativism can merely hold that the rationality of moral judgements is internal to a particular way of life and the attractions of relativism are undermined by one great disadvantage concerning conflicts of beliefs: surely a society with a moral belief, say, that human sacrifice is good should not be left alone to practise that which it believes just because values are relative? Other prime examples include female circumcision and the exploitation of children. This apparently makes conflicts of moral beliefs no better than conflicts of taste or dependent on some arbitrary rules of a game: if someone doesn't like cheese, it is only violence and power – not reason – that may force her to eat it. She could never be convinced to like it, in the same way that reason can convince a subject who is unaware that thirteen times thirteen are one hundred and sixty nine.

Relativism is rejected because it cannot resolve conflicts between ways of life, and for this reason alone moral universalism is a far more attractive theory. However, moral universalism is either both vacuous and insubstantial or it, too, leads to conflict; in other words, its supposed advantage is chimerical. If we examine the claim of universality at the heart of most ethical theories, it may be revealed that it is an ad hoc and, ultimately, frustrating addition to practical reason. We shall concentrate this examination solely on the claims of moral idealism using Kant's ethical theory as our guide.

## ***2/ Moral idealism and the assumption of universality***

In proposing moral idealism, all I wish to offer is a minimal idealism, or the serious consideration of Kant's Copernican revolution.<sup>2</sup> In order for a subject to form judgements, certain concepts have to inhere in the subject. So, following Kant, a theoretical judgement is made possible by the subject's possession of prior and universal concepts belonging to the categories of modality, relation, quality and quantity. To put it simply, I would not be able to experience x as the cause of y, unless I already possessed the concept of causality and were able to bring it to bear on the content of my experience.

Universality is written into the Kantian epistemological position from the beginning because rational beings necessarily share the same constitutive concepts. If a subject is rational, which is to say if he is a possible knower or maker of judgements, then he must share Kant's twelve concepts and two pure intuitions. We shall not split hairs over the elements on this list, but

leave it open whether it is an exhaustive and accurate table of the constitutive concepts. What is more significant for us is why it is that all rational beings combine the constitutive concepts in the same way as evidenced by the fact we can talk about and share our experiences.

The common sense answer is that the “real” object impinges on our senses and we translate it and filter the data through our concepts. This is not, however, consistent with Kantian idealism. Causality belongs to the concepts of the subject and not to reality, it is already a speculative step to posit “objects” in reality outside of experience. Intuitions are given to us as subjects and we form judgements on their basis.<sup>3</sup> So, how do we all form the same judgements? A full response to this question would have to look closely at Kant’s description of the schemata and the role of the imagination, but unfortunately we have no space or time to do this.<sup>4</sup> An investigation of these would plausibly lead one from the constitutive concepts of experience to the regulative ideas of reason, and one in particular: the idea of the unity of all knowledge in one mind. The system of knowledge is ideally whole and harmonious.<sup>5</sup> At the risk of oversimplifying Kant’s position, I propose that what he has in mind is the assumption that since theoretical judgements aim at describing *what is*, then they ought to – and here one feels the force of the regulative norm – be the same for me and for you. Our judgements ought to converge. If they do not, we need to rid them of those contingencies (my particular angle to the table and my emotional response to its garish colour, for example) which are insignificant in the formulation of the judgement. Universality is a necessary norm for theoretical judgements since theoretical judgements ideally ought to converge.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas theoretical judgements are determined by modality, relation, quality and quantity, Kant informs us that all moral judgements are determined by the application of one single concept, viz. freedom.<sup>7</sup> If the object of the judgement is not supposed to be free – that is, taken to be a moral agent – then, moral judgements are not applicable. The concept of responsibility cannot be applied to tables, chairs, animals, most children and the insane simply because they are not free. This is **far from being a controversial initial** premise. According to Kant, if the subject acts freely, then moral judgements can be made in line with the categorical imperative: if the agent is making an exception of himself, or if he uses others as means without their consent, then he is immoral.

Again, here, I would like to avoid specific problems arising from the Kantian account of moral judgements, but it is worthwhile saying something about the possibility of transgression. It is often assumed that, on Kant’s account, one is either good or irrational and the agent can never freely commit wrong. However, Kant does reveal two ways in which a man can be bad: using others as means without their consent and making oneself an exception to the law of reason. I believe that the latter is merely derived from the former and they both derive from the constitutive concept of freedom: I rely on you to obey conventions such as promising which I pretend to do in order to profit from you. This is immoral because I do not give your freedom and your rationality the respect it deserves and I actually contradict the value of freedom.

For Kant, other lesser moral constitutive concepts are all derived from the idea of the free-will (imperatives, autonomy, persons, rational ends) and moral judgements are universal because they are synthetic a priori: they are true for all rational beings. Yet it is not clear that such judgements will not conflict. Kant assumes that they will not due to the fact that there can be one and only one solution to moral problems, but such universality is built into his system due

to his assertion that moral judgements are synthetic a priori and therefore identical to epistemological judgements. However, epistemological judgements are ruled by a regulative concept that there can be one and only one possible true description of objects of experience (unity). Is there any reason to assume that the same norm governs moral judgements?

In fact, Kant offers a different normative ideal for practical reason when he states: "... the true vocation of reason must be to produce a will that is good, not perhaps *as a means* to other purposes, but *good in itself*, for which reason was absolutely necessary."<sup>7</sup> Freedom is the concept which constitutes moral judgements, but if I am free I can form any judgement which is not contradictory to freedom. The good will regulates moral judgements, but on two levels. First, that the reason for action be good in-itself. On this level, to be a moral agent one needs to act on a reason which is good and can be recognised as such by others. What is rational is good for me, but I can recognise the rationality of the other's intention without endorsing its goodness. Kant wants to push this subjective goodness over into **the objectivity or synthetic a priori**, though. Second, then, the good will recognises that good in-itself is binding because it is rational, or the right precedes and determines the good. This, though, is a step too far. A good reason is intelligible to both me and you, it is one which makes sense. A good moral reason is one which makes sense and is also freely motivated by reason and not desire. Yet, there is nothing in this description which justifies the move from rightness to goodness as Kant supposes.

Kant moves from a reason which is recognised as valid by all agents to a reason which must be endorsed by all rational agents: what is right is good. There is no justification for this transposition except the assumption of theoretical wisdom: what is true for me ought to be true for you, but there is no reason why this norm ought to govern the moral realm. For example, I can understand that a Hindu does not eat beef and that it would be wrong to eat beef if I were a Hindu, but I am not and though I can recognise the validity of the reason, that does not make it a universally binding reason. It is possible, given the normative element of the good will, to offer a weaker form of universality which is, if an agent is free, his reason for action is valid so long as it does not use others as ends without their consent or, which is just another way to say the same thing, makes an exception of the agent himself.

However, Kant assumes a strong universality: if a reason is determined in line with the categorical imperative, then it is a moral duty for all subjects, at all times and in all situations. This leads either to the narrowing of moral duties to abstract universals (respect others, treat others as ends) which are insubstantial and cannot direct action or more substantial duties (do not break promises, do not commit suicide) which may lead to conflicts.<sup>8</sup> The two major problems with Kant's moral system arise because he chooses to endorse a strong rather than a weak universality.

Kant's motivation for so doing is twofold. On the one hand it is because he is a man of the Enlightenment and he wants to avoid the relativism of superstitions and irrational beliefs. On the other, it is due to the transposition of the norm of unity from the theoretical realm to the practical realm: we must all form the same judgements. However, in the theoretical realm this norm was due to the assumption that theoretical judgements describe *what is*, but moral judgements describe *what ought to be* and there is no coherentist justification why there should be but one answer to *what ought to be*. And *what ought to be* is determined by the

agent's concept of good, not right, so the substantial account of good supplied by a way of life adds the necessary flesh to the abstract bones of Kant's ethical theory.<sup>9</sup>

However, weak universalism may commit us to a different norm governing moral judgements, viz. the simple recognition of the validity of other agents' motivations or reasons for action even if we do not admit them as binding on ourselves. This means we have pluralism of moral principles and it will lead to conflict. However, this conflict will not be seen as resolvable or as the reflection of an error in our method. It will be recognised as somehow inevitable. Instead of resolution we may seek to minimise conflict under the governance of some norm of harmony rather than convergence, but that is outside the scope of this paper to decide. All I want to demonstrate here is that the unjustified assumption of universality in idealist moral theory is unwarranted and harmful to moral discourse. The main disadvantage of relativism, that it is impossible to decide between competing ways of life, is, therefore, revealed to be a pseudo-problem. If one cannot decide between them it may be due to pluralism of values and that has to be accepted. Alternatively, it may be that, even given a certain way of life, the reason for action is still invalid (and here one thinks once more about female circumcision or human sacrifice) since it either uses an agent without his or her consent or makes an exception of the subject. This, of course, relies on the Kantian view and that still has to be supported.

### ***3/ Conclusion***

This paper attempts to show that moral discourse is governed by a norm which is transposed from theoretical discourse without justification: the assumption that there can be but one answer to a problem or but one description of reality. Logically it would be a poor inference to move from the claim that it has not been justified to it cannot be justified, especially without considering alternatives to ethical idealism. In theoretical reason such an assumption is justified whether one be a realist, coherentist or pragmatist, but there is no reason to suppose it is applicable to moral judgements. In fact, the assumption leads to two undesirable consequences: one, insubstantial moral principles that are vacuous, empty and formal; and two, substantial duties which lead to a conflict that the moral system itself finds contradictory. If one embraces the weaker form of universality and its subsequent normative basis, these two problems are avoided. First, moral principles are substantial because the abstract universal principles generated by the moral will are fleshed out by a particular way of life and its conception of the good. Second, conflicts of duty still occur but they are no longer seen as symptomatic of an error in one's moral reasoning. They are just an inevitable consequence of the recognition of the pluralism of moral values.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Williams, B *An Introduction to Ethics* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Kant, I *Critique of Pure Reason* trans. Meiklejohn, J (revised by Politis, V) London: Everyman; 1993; Bxvi.

<sup>3</sup> See the “Transcendental Doctrine of Elements” and the “Transcendental Logic” in *Critique of Pure Reason* 1993.

<sup>4</sup> See “The Schematism of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding” in *Critique of Pure Reason* 1993.

<sup>5</sup> See chapter III of the “Transcendental Dialectic” in *Critique of Pure Reason* 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Kant, I *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* trans. Gregor, M Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1998, Preface and *Critique of Practical Reason* trans. Gregor, M Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1997, I, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Kant, I *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* 1998, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> The first problem motivates Hegel’s attack on the empty formalism of the Kantian position. The clearest exposition is to be found in section II of *On the Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, on its Place in Moral Philosophy, and its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Right* trans. Nisbet, H in *Political Writings* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1999.

<sup>9</sup> This point seems to fuel Hegel’s examination of Kant’s examples such as promising and its reliance on a way of life with moral practices inspired by the institution of private property. See *On the Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law* 1999, pp. 124-128.